

Civil War Book Review

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Li'L Dan, The Drummer Boy A Civil War Story

Romare Bearden

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Interview

LI'L DAN, THE DRUMMER BOY A CIVIL WAR STORY

Bearden, Romare

Winter 2004

Li'l Dan, The Drummer Boy:

Interviews with Dr. Maya Angelou

and Dr. Robin D. G. Kelley

by Leah Wood Jewett

Maya Angelou is a celebrated poet, writer, and educator. The author of I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, she is a recipient of the Presidential Medal of Honor. She is the Reynolds Professor at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Li'l Dan the Drummer Boy includes a reading of the book by Dr. Angelou on CD-ROM.

Robin D. G. Kelley, a Professor of Anthropology and African-American Studies at Columbia University, has written widely on American culture and politics. His books include, Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination (2002); Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression (1990); Race Rebels: Culture Politics and the Black Working Class (1994); and Yo' Mama's DisFunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America (1997). He is currently completing a biography of jazz pianist/composer Thelonious Monk.

Interview with Maya Angelou

Interview with Robin Kelley

Interview with Maya Angelou

Civil War Book Review(CWBR): What motivated you to lend your voice to this project?

Maya Angelou (MA): The chance to do anything with Romare Bearden was too good to pass up. He's not only an artist I respect, appreciate, and collect, but he was a friend of mine as well. I would have stopped to listen to any request with his name embodied in the request. But then when I read the story, I thought it was so sweet. And it's a classic kind of story.

CWBR: Who do you think should read this book?

MA: Oh, everybody should read it. It reminds me a little of *Alice in Wonderland*, and of the story from the Netherlands of the little boy with his finger in the dike. Every culture has those stories, how the child came about to save the people. It's a classic form.

CWBR: What impact do you hope that Li'l Dan will have on readers?

MA: I hope that young people will read it or have it read to them and they will know not just about their own history, which is very important, but also get the sense that they are capable of doing some wonderful things. At its best, that's what literature helps us to do. We can see somebody from a different culture, from a different time, and be encouraged to believe that, "Oh, I could do that," or "Maybe I could do that," or "I'd like to think I could do that." Good literature strengthens the reader.

CWBR: What unique perspective can an artist bring to subjects such as the Civil War and slavery?

MA: Mr. Bearden's story and his drawings take the distance away from us. The artist helps us to be in the story, in the picture, on the page. We are really there with the people. He or she will bring us right into the action, so it's happening to us, to the reader. Others may not have the same ability to evoke such a sense of immediacy from the reader.

Nonfiction can often tell the facts but fiction can tell the truth. Sometimes facts can obscure the truth. You can tell so many facts that you never get to the truth of it. You can tell the places *where*, the people *who*, the times *when*, the

reasons *why*, the methods *how*, and never get to what the human being was feeling. This is why I think fiction, and even poetry, will serve one better in finding out what was really happening.

Interview with Robin Kelley

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): How did you become involved in the project?

Robin Kelley (RK): I happen to be married to Romare Bearden's niece and am involved, somewhat, with the Romare Bearden Foundation. They found the manuscript and original watercolor paintings and collage among his papers and planned to publish them initially as an art book. I suggested they make the book available for a wider audience--namely, the audience it was intended for: children. I then put them in touch with my literary agent Tanya McKinnon, who is just fabulous, and she sold it to Simon and Schuster.

Once the project was underway, we realized the text was still a bit rough and it took some knowledge for granted, so I edited it and filled in a couple of very basic facts, but the editing was very minimal. It was a beautiful book from the beginning.

Next, I ran into Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., at LAX airport and told him about the book. He told me this remarkable story of how Bearden told the story of **Li'l Dan** and laid all the pictures on the floor of his studio and I immediately thought that his story would make a wonderful introduction. Professor Gates agreed and delivered a very moving, personal story of Bearden and his encounter with **Li'l Dan**, making what was already a wonderful book into something more special.

CWBR: In what historical/sthetic context was Li'l Dan created?

RK: I'm not sure when exactly the book jelled for Bearden, but I think he completed the manuscript and the illustrations some time in the 1970s. It seems to be, however, that this was something he had been thinking about for some time. At the time, there were a slew of books on African American history, an increasing number written for children. Bearden was hardly joining the

bandwagon, but he must have seen a need for a book that resists the story of how oppressed we were under slavery but rather focused on how important African Americans were in bringing liberty and freedom to the entire country. The fact that black music and black people, in this sweet tale, quite literally save America, is precisely one of those metaphors that have driven much of his visual art.

CWBR: *What do you consider to be the broader cultural significance of this work?*

RK: I suppose there are several points of significance. First, it is a literary work by someone we know as one of the greatest collagists in the world (who was also a great painter). Second, it tells a story of the Civil War that places black soldiers and the collapse of slavery and the transformation of enslaved people to free people at the center of the story. In this sense, it shares much in common with W.E.B. DuBois's magisterial book, *Black Reconstruction in America*. Third, it tells a story about Africa's presence in the New World. Whereas most writers insist that the "drum" had been outlawed and disappeared in New World African cultures in the U.S., Bearden shows through this fictional tale a real truth: that drum traditions continued. Fourth, as I said before, he repeats a point he had been making much of his life--a point shared by the likes of writers Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray as well as Larry Neal. The point is: black music, our ingenuity and creativity, sits at the center of American democracy and more than once saved that democracy for the whole nation. We need to keep the drums playing if we are going to redeem the soul of the Nation, which seems to me is **Li'l Dan's** message.

CWBR: *Who should read this book?*

RK: Every one of all ages. Granted, it was written for children but it's also an incredible work by one of the great masters of modern art.

The CWBR staff would like to thank Jennifer Zatorski for coordinating the interviews.